**Governor's Renewable Energy Policy Conference**

***Siting and Permitting Large-Scale Projects in the California Desert and Beyond***

*March 24, 2010 - UC Riverside, Highlander Union Building (HUB)*

**A Policy Primer for the Afternoon Breakout Sessions**

To assist in framing the conversations that will take place during the 10:45 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. breakout sessions, each panel's moderator has written a brief overview of the panel topic. These policy papers and the corresponding three questions will guide breakout discussions between panelists and session attendees as well as the report back to the larger conference audience.

## Breakout Session 1 - Landscape of the desert: How to balance conflicting environmental goals?

*Moderator: Kevin Sweeney, Resources Legacy Fund. Panelists: Ron Goldman, Riverside County Planning Director; Kim Delfino, California Program Director, Defenders of Wildlife; Shannon Eddy, Executive Director, Large Solar Association; Laura Crane, Nature Conservancy; Michael Allen, Professor & Chair, Plant Pathology & Microbiology, UC Riverside*

From a car window along Highway 15, the California desert may look like empty space. To the careful observer – or anyone inclined and able to walk parts of the region – there is so much more. These are diverse landscapes, rich in biodiversity.

In the same way that a desert wash can look utterly different during winter flooding and the wildflower season that follows, the desert looks different to many of us. What we see at first glance varies greatly, and it depends on the perspective we bring to the discussion.

- The desert is a unique landscape, a place of beauty, solace and escape. A fragile ecosystem already weakened by development, it is home to multiple endangered species. Protection of these lands and the biodiversity they support is essential.
- It contains some of the most valuable solar resources on earth. Radiation levels in some places are extraordinary, and their proximity to a large population center means these lands could be used to reduce our use of fossil fuels – and help stave off the worst effects of global warming.
- It is a dynamic resource, changing at an unprecedented pace. Even the most optimistic projections for climate change suggest we will still see significant changes in desert temperatures and precipitation patterns. The region's biodiversity will change.

Perspectives differ, but each offers a different angle on environmental protection. The landscape conservationist starts with an understanding of fragmented landscapes in dire need of protection. The renewable energy advocate starts with an understanding that quickly reducing our use of fossil fuels is a vital step toward long-term protection of desert and other habitats. These starting points are both valid.

Degrees of urgency add a layer of complexity. The economic recession makes financing difficult for renewable energy projects, and access to federal stimulus funding ends this year. Waiting to respond in earnest to the climate crisis will make future responses even more difficult: Lengthy delays may not serve desert ecosystems.

**The *Landscape of the Desert* Panel will discuss the following three questions:**

- **What are the necessary steps to ensure a balanced process and balanced results?**
- **Should we be looking for a healthy balance in the desert, as we understand it to exist today? Or should we be looking for a healthy balance in the desert as it might exist 30 or 50 years from now?**
- **What are some of the tradeoffs we may need to accept? How do we prioritize these tradeoffs?**

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## Breakout Session 2 - Prosperity & Opportunity: How will these projects affect my community?

*Moderator: Peter Weiner, Attorney, Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker. Panelists: Brad Mitzelfelt, San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors; John Means, CCCAOE Central Regional Vice-President, Kern Community College District; Darren Bouton, First Solar; Richard Sierra, Business Manager, Laborers International Union of North America, Local 783*

Renewable energy development provides significant potential for new jobs and the economic revitalization of California. There is great opportunity to both employ skilled workers who are now available and to educate a new workforce to support renewable energy needs in the future. Renewable energy projects could also impact local community services, and acquisition of private land for public purposes (such as habitat preservation) could remove developable land from the tax rolls.

The manufacturing of solar and wind project materials is currently performed outside localities where the projects may be built. There are both construction and operational jobs connected to renewable energy facilities and communities can benefit if the local workforce has the skills to do these jobs. By cooperating to maximize training, communities and renewable energy companies can maximize job benefits for the local community.

Renewable energy jobs also create other jobs in the community. Large scale solar, for example, demands lots of glass and mirrors. How do we organize to capture these other related sources of wealth and prosperity in our communities? Entrepreneurs, local economic developers and the state must work together to ensure that economic drivers positively affect the way of life in rural communities.

Just as environmental advocates have feared the "paving of the desert" by renewable energy projects, so some community leaders have expressed concern regarding the impact of projects on fire, police and other services. They have also questioned the acquisition of private land for public purposes, such as species protection, because of a perceived negative impact on the local tax base that otherwise might be assisted by commercial development. These issues need to be discussed and addressed as planning and projects move forward.

**The *Prosperity and Opportunity* Panel will discuss the following three questions:**

- **How can renewable energy projects assist the current workforce in local communities? What skill sets are needed for the construction and operation of renewable energy projects? How many jobs are at issue? What kind? Can jobs be kept in the community, or will they go to people outside who have unique skills?**
- **How can renewable energy projects create an economic multiplier effect? How do jobs revitalize communities?**
- **Is there a downside to renewable energy development in terms of tax base, impact on services, or removal of developable land from the tax rolls? How can renewable energy developers work with local and state government to minimize or avoid these impacts?**

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## Breakout Session 3 - Planning for the Future: How do we ensure projects are built quickly and in the right places?

*Moderator: Rich Ferguson, RETI. Panelists: Arthur Haubenstock, Birghtsource; Jim Avery, California Transmission Planning Group; Johanna Wald, NRDC; Nancy Ryan, Commissioner, PUC; Tom Pogacnik, Deputy State Director of Resources, BLM; Anthony Eggert, Commissioner, CEC*

The "right places" for renewable energy generation projects minimize environmental concerns associated with the projects and with the transmission lines needed to deliver the energy to consumers. The right places are also places where energy can be generated at reasonable cost to consumers while providing jobs, clean power and replacing power sources that produce air pollution and green house gas emissions. What kinds of trade-offs can we accept between cost to consumers, protection of species and the environment, and more efficient siting, permitting and construction?

Some private lands (such as those on disturbed soils, less critical habitat or those closer to existing infrastructure) offer great opportunities for large scale renewable projects which minimize environmental impacts and cost. However, private lands suitable for utility-scale renewable generation are often fragmented and held by many different property owners, creating serious obstacles and delays to construction.

Renewable energy projects often can be located and designed to minimize environmental concerns associated with generation and transmission. Doing so, however, may increase costs significantly. Solar and wind energy is least expensive where the sun is brightest and winds are strong, so limiting development in these areas increases cost to consumers. Increasing protection for species of concern usually increases cost as well. Locating a project farther from urban areas is likely to require longer transmission lines and requiring transmission lines to be underground increases costs dramatically.

Government land use plans - federal, state and local - determine where and under what conditions energy projects can be built. Historically, private energy developers have been relied on to choose their sites as long as development is consistent with these plans. Land use plans developed by different agencies may not be well coordinated and plans that are too restrictive may limit development.

**The *Planning for the Future* Panel will discuss the following three questions:**

- **How do we assess private lands for potential energy production and assemble them quickly for renewable development? How do we match this opportunity against faster access to public lands?**
- **What additional economic cost should be accepted to locate and build renewable energy and transmission projects which have less serious environmental concerns?**
- **How can we ensure that land use plans are coordinated and provide adequate areas for renewable energy generation? Should we rely on energy developers to identify sites consistent with these plans, or should government play a more active role in determining where projects are built?**